POWER TO THE PEOPLE
I Corinthians 12:4-13
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A friend of mine couldn't wait to tell me about an incident which happened in the family car around noon on Sunday on the way home from church. He and his family are members of Trinity Episcopal and apparently each week his children comment on whether or not they are getting home before the members of this congregation.

One Sunday morning our parking lot was still full as they drove by and his young son said, "Look, Dad, we beat the Pedestrians this morning."

I didn't think it was nearly as funny as he did. In fact, I told him that's the kind of thing Anglicans have been saying about Presbyterians ever since English troops chased Scottish covenanters up into the hills several centuries ago.

We are pretty pedestrian. Our liturgy isn't very fancy. Presbyterians have been known to have major arguments about whether there ought to be candles in church. Our highest officer is called a stated clerk and, nationally, we spend a lot of time trying to keep him humble. We don't have bishops, our clergy have very little authority by themselves. We are, frankly, rather intentionally pedestrian. And once a year we affirm it in a rite which is Presbyterianism at its most Presbyterian - the Ordination of Elders and Deacons.

It is the essence of the Presbyterian idea. It is not simply a gesture. It is not the same, for instance, as the old Layman's Sunday concept - the occasion upon which nervous doctors, lawyers, teachers or bricklayers were asked to act like clergy...That is a gesture. The ordination of lay persons in Presbyterianism means, first,that the power in this organization is with the people, and second, that the idea of vocation applies not to clergy alone, but to all Christian people.

The first of those ideas - that power resides in the people is, as you recognize, the pivotal concept in Republican Democracy and, as such, perhaps the most dynamic idea in Western Civilization. It germinated in the Renaissance: it began to surface in the ideas of Martin Luther and John Calvin: it flowered in the eighteenth century, finally expressing itself in the fluid prose of Thomas Jefferson regarding"self-evident truths" and unalienable rights and "that to secure these rights governments are instituted... deriving their just powers from the consent of the government..." "Power to the people", it wasn't invented in Berkeley in the 60's. It's as old as the Reformation, and before that it has its roots in the remarkable experience of those remarkable saints - the first Christians.

In Corinth the issue of who shall exercise power was first joined, as it always is, at the point of deciding whose particular function is most important for the overall welfare of the organization. Those Corinthians were a very interesting bunch: vigorous, contentious, competitive and as soon as they organized themselves into something called the Ecclesia - the Church - they began to argue about who would be the boss, and whose special function was most important.

When Paul heard about their arguing he wrote a letter...There are many gifts, he told them; many different skills and abilities. God needs them all. None is more important, more necessary, more holy than any of the others. In fact, the church is like a body - dependent on all of its parts performing the function they were best suited to perform.

The point is that there is no ecclesiastical caste system: there are a variety of ways to be a Christian: no one way is more important, more pleasing to God, than another way. Unfortunately, much of that has been lost on the church. Very early in its life the Christian Church borrowed two time honored ideas from the world. The first was the hierarchical model for exercise of power and authority. Just as a Kingdom needed a King, an Empire an emperor, an army a general, so the church as organization needed a leader, a head, a boss. Just as the world granted status, privilege and rank to its leaders, so the church rather quickly followed suit with its clergy. The second idea was borrowed from Greek philosophy; namely, that all reality can be divided into two categories - spirit and flesh, sacred and secular. The realm of religion was seen to be distinct, apart from the world.

When those two ideas combine - the hierarchical model of leadership and the dichotomy between religion and the rest of life, the result simply put, is two kinds of Christians - clergy and laity. One, granted the special status of leadership, is isolated from the world, undefiled by such worldly concerns as earning a living and raising a family: the other is emersed in the world but dependent now on the religious specialist to grant access to the holy; through prayer - which it was assumed they could do best, through the reading of sacred texts - which were kept in a language only they could read, and through sacred ritual which ordination permitted them alone to perform. The clergy had a vocation, which means a calling, given by God. The laity were less fortunate, but free to pursue life on the basis of other considerations.

Now that is a very long way from the content of I Corinthians 12 in particular and New Testament theology in general. But it has been an altogether durable heresy. Twenty centuries later we are still operating with a slightly modified version of the same system. Clergy, it is assumed rather universally, should have been called by God to their profession. Doctors, teachers, mechanics come to theirs by an altogether different route. Clergy are specialists: the universal assumption is that they know about God, can pray better and longer and more effectively than the laity. And, somewhere inside all of us there lingers that old, old notion that to be a minister one must not be worldly. I still don't know whether to be flattered or insulted when someone says, "You don't look like a minister." Charles M. Smith in How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious, advises that a successful preacher will "gather up in himself a host of characteristics which advertise that here is a man of much prayer, disentagled from the secular, soiling concerns which obsess most men...You may have a taste for shaggy sport coats, bright ties and the like. You must ruthlessly suppress it." The real tragedy, however, is not in the popular stereotype of ministers, but in the resultant idea of the laity. The tragedy is that the entire Protestant experiment was born in an idea so revolutionary that it would have erased all the distinctions within the people of God. Listen to this significant paragraph from Presbyterian historian Leonard Trinterud. "The ministry, said Calvin, is a function of the whole church, distributed among the members according as God has given to each various gifts and capacities and corresponding calls. Calvin rejected the concept embodied in the terms 'clergy' and 'laity'. The ministry is not an order of men, religiously different from those who are supposedly merely laymen. The ministry is not even a group of men. The ministry is basically the church fulfilling its God-given task." (The Church and Its Changing Ministry, p. 46).

At the time of the Reformation it was called the "Priesthood of all Believers". It was the revolutionary concept that the task of the clergy, while requiring full-time effort, was essentially no more important and certainly no more holy, than any task performed by any other person. I continue to believe that this idea, to which we pay occasional lip service, is one of the most dynamic ideas within the Christian faith, and that it has ramifications far beyond the life of the institutional church.

Consider, for instance, the broader implications. We assume that God calls people to the clergy; that to be a minister is a holy calling. But what if God is equally interested in politics, and homemaking and the law? What if God's call may be answered in a variety of ways depending on the particular skills and abilities He has already given the person? Elton Trueblood put it eloquently: "The exciting idea behind the New Testament use of 'calling' is that ours is God's world, in all its parts. The way in which we grow potatoes is as much a matter of God's will as is the way in which we pray or sing." (Your Other Calling).

The radical message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God really loves the world. The world is where His work is done. What that means personally is that God values what you do in the world. Regardless of how you earn your living, or how you spend your time, it is of interest to God. He calls you to do it for His glory. In fact, because you spend most of your time in the world and not in the church, your opportunity to be an effective disciple of Jesus Christ and therefore an important part of the church, is far greater than the opportunity a clergyman has. Hans-Ruedi Weber wrote: "Christ does not grant special gifts only to men and women who are full-time, lifetime employees of the Church. All the people of God share in Christ's ministry in and to the world, on the front lines. But the work of front-line soldiers belongs especially to laymen, who spend most of their waking hours in social, political, economic and cultural areas where the decisive battles of faith are being fought." (Op.cit. p.12). That is to say, God's work may be talked about, planned and celebrated in this building. But it happens elsewhere - in the State House, a courtroom and banks and schools.

The simple fact is that you - where you are most of the time - will determine how the important issues of life are resolved. You, not the clergy, are involved in making this community livable: the vital decisions are made in your offices as you make the city go financially and legally and commercially, in your clinic or operating room or classroom. You are called in that context to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Your vocation is to be His special person in the world, wherever and however you earn your living and spend your time.

J.H.Oldham once asked, "Why should a scientist or engineer or an administrator attach any great importance to religion unless it says to him: - 'In the work you are doing day by day you are a partner of God in His work of creation and the realization of His purpose for the (human family).'" (Ibid. p.62).

The radical message of the New Testament is that you are, or can be, God's partner: that He has called you, however exalted or modest you are to an important work. He has called you to heal or to create or to build or to teach. He has called you to help someone else, to extend compassion and caring to someone who needs you. That is His work too. When a child is healed - when a difficult political decision is made honestly - when parent and teenager extend grace and forgiveness - God's call has been answered.

The Presbyterian idea depends on a common understanding that power here belongs to the people - and out there too. We are vigorously democratic, or pedestrian, if you will. It also depends on the radically New Testament idea that Jesus Christ calls each one of us to follow Him by using the special gifts God has given us in His service.

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What I want to suggest is that God's call to you is not necessarily a mystical voice telling you what to do. Rather His call - comes in the form of that special gift He has given to you. Our faith is that in Jesus Christ God has shown how deeply He cares about the world. In Christ, He has torn down the barriers we construct between sacred and secular. The world is Holy - made Holy by God's love. We are called, you and I, in Jesus Christ, to use what God has given us.

May I suggest that there is nothing more joyful and exciting and satisfying than to know what God has given, to claim it as one's own...and then to put it to work in the world? May God grant us to be one body in His service. May He grant you a sense of your own gifts, a joy in owning them and that satisfaction in using them in the church and in the world for His glory.

Amen.

Almighty God, for all Your gifts we give You thanks. For those You have called today to special service among us: for those who have served well in the past: for the rich diversity of this congregation, we give thanks.

Lead us, Father, in the days ahead. Give us strength and courage and love to be Your people: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.